

1992 Post-Standard story explored Dr. Thomas Szasz's controversial views

The Post-Standard

on September 12, 2012 at 9:50 AM, updated September 12, 2012 at 9:55 AM

*Dr. Thomas Szasz, who **died Saturday** at his home in Manlius, was well-known in the field of psychiatry for his controversial position that mental illness was a myth. The Post-Standard published a profile of Szasz by staff writer Melanie Hirsch on Feb. 19, 1992. That article appears below in its entirety.*

He is either the bad boy of American psychiatry or its conscience, or both. But one thing is certain about the enigma that is Dr. Thomas Szasz: He's been firing salvos against convention and authority since he was in knickers.

As a little boy, Szasz (pronounced zoz) was out walking with his mother in his native Budapest one day when a poor man on the street approached them for change. Szasz's mother told the beggar she didn't have any money.

"He was extremely bothered by it, " says his daughter, Suzy. "He was bothered because he knew it wasn't true." And he never let his well-to-do mother forget it.

Taking on psychiatrists

Szasz's targets have changed during the years, especially after he emigrated to the United States and became a psychiatrist. But the firing never let up.

Consider this latest round against his fellow shrinks, who have taken some of his hardest hits:

"I am probably the only psychiatrist in the world whose hands are clean. I have never committed anyone. I have never given electric shock. I have never, ever, ever given drugs to a mental patient."

But after more than 41 years of practicing what he preaches, Szasz's refusal to use drugs and some other tools of his trade has landed him in court.

In late January, he was sued by the widow of a fellow psychiatrist who killed himself while under Szasz's care. The Lewis County woman alleges Szasz committed malpractice because he instructed her husband to stop taking a drug commonly prescribed to alleviate manic depression.

Six months later, the man hanged himself after he had beaten himself in the head with a hammer and cut himself on the neck.

Szasz won't comment on the suit. But he has argued vociferously during the years that every person has the "inalienable right" to commit suicide if that's what he or she is bound to do.

"We now view suicide as a disease: hence the efforts to 'prevent' and 'treat' it, " he once wrote. "But suicide is more like a treatment: It is the only effective remedy against what sometimes ails people - namely, the necessity to go on living."

[Editor's note: The lawsuit was settled for an undisclosed sum in April 1994, shortly before it was to be tried in state Supreme Court.]

The myth of mental illness

The 71-year-old Manlius resident - who has been called the most controversial psychiatrist in the world - eschews psychiatric drugs and treatment because he doesn't believe in mental illness.

He insists a mind or psyche can't be diseased like a stomach rotting from cancer. It's behavior we're talking about, he says, not disease. If you beat a child, you're a criminal, not a convalescent.

His first and most controversial book to espouse that theory - published in 1961 - nearly got him fired, he says. And it created such a rift it contributed to the eventual departure of his boss and a handful of colleagues who had supported him.

The controversy permeated the entire psychiatric community. "He earned the lasting enmity of his profession, " says Dr. Alan Stone, a well-known critic who is professor of law and psychiatry at Harvard University.

Szasz wrote "The Myth of Mental Illness" in Syracuse, between classes at the SUNY Health Science Center, where he taught until he retired from the Department of Psychiatric and Behavioral Sciences in 1990.

In it, he argued that since disease can only affect the body, mental illness had become a metaphor for something else. What we call mental illnesses, he argued, are really basic, human problems.

Many detractors

Although scholars in other fields agree with some of his views, many psychiatrists say Szasz is wrong to think the only illnesses that strike above the neck are organic brain diseases.

"He's wrong. Mental illness is not a myth, " says Dr. Lawrence Hartmann, president of the American Psychiatric Association and a physician on the staff of Harvard University's medical school.

"Mental illness is a complex bio-psycho-social phenomenon. He's saying, 'Let's reduce it to merely brain chemistry.' I'm saying, 'That's wrong.' ... If everybody believed him, it would leave millions of people out on a limb."

But Szasz has heard it all before, and he's not budging.

"Behavior is not disease. Disease is not behavior, " he told a reporter before the recent lawsuit was filed. "Alcoholism is behavior. You pick up a glass and put it to your mouth." His colleagues have recognized alcoholism as a disease for years.

Szasz is troubled by the whole notion of treating mental illness, and he argued in "The Myth of Mental Illness" that there could be no cure for something that didn't exist. He was especially incensed by treating someone against his or her will, calling it a "crime against humanity." Even now, if he is asked if it isn't incumbent on psychiatrists to treat or commit someone abusing a child, for instance, he is incredulous.

"What do you need a psychiatrist for?" he says. "That's what we have criminal laws for."

Szasz argues to this day that society has a stake in perpetuating "the myth of mental illness" because psychiatry has become the official American "religion."

"The implication is that if you are mentally healthy, there will be no strife, there will be no Arab-Israeli conflict, no murders, no crimes in the streets, no homelessness, " he says. "It's called heaven, only they brought it down to Earth."

For all his skepticism about mental illness, Szasz has no problem with psychiatrists trying to help someone, as long as the help isn't coercive.

"I have always said I have no objection to psychiatry between consenting adults, " he says, smiling at his play on words.

No patients, only people

It comes as no surprise that he does not call the handful of people he sees in his neat-as-a-pin office in the SUNY Health Science Center "patients." They are persons, he instructs.

"And I don't treat them with anything. I listen and talk to them."

But his critics - and there are plenty - will point out that science has uncovered a genetic or chemical basis for schizophrenia and some other mental disorders, and that science may prove other causes as time goes on. Sometimes people are sick and not merely misbehaving, they say. And many can be helped.

The APA's Hartmann and some other psychiatrists also take issue with Szasz because they see him as the catalyst for laws that made it harder for families to treat or commit seriously ill relatives who won't admit they need help.

"My argument with Szasz has always been that he's more interested in patients' liberty than patients' needs, " says Stone.

"He gave patients the opportunity to deny they were sick, and he gave legislators the opportunity to deny they were responsible.

"There is no doubt in my view that the law has gone too far, the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction, and the proof is the homeless mentally ill. He gave us the excuse to abandon our responsibilities."

Advanced patients' rights

But supporters and even some critics credit Szasz, a staunch Libertarian, for making psychiatrists and others more cognizant of patients' rights.

"Tom has done perhaps more than any other psychiatrist in this century to prod the profession by focusing on the civil liberties of patients, " says Syracuse psychologist Sidney A. Orgel, a longtime colleague and friend.

"Before he came along, I don't think there was so much soul-searching before we committed someone."

Even so, says his former boss, Szasz's charges were often unfair.

"Even if some psychiatrists are misguided, they're not malicious and malevolent as he made it sound, " says Dr. Marc Hollender, a former SUNY psychiatry department chairman, who clashed with Szasz after "The Myth of Mental Illness" was published.

Szasz won't talk about the furor his book caused up on the hill 31 years ago, except to note that it was a "traumatic, tense time" and that he came "very close" to losing his job as a tenured professor.

He will say New York State's then-commissioner of mental hygiene - a Hungarian who went to the same high school as he - wrote to Szasz's bosses here and said that if he didn't believe in mental illness, he wasn't fit to be a psychiatrist.

Refused to be forced out

Friends say Szasz stuck to his guns during the controversy, even after his superiors told him he could no longer teach at the former Syracuse Psychiatric Hospital, a state-run facility where SUNY psychiatric students trained.

State officials allowed Szasz to continue teaching at SUNY, but his bosses "attempted to provoke him into insubordination" by taking away his secretary, doubling his teaching load and giving him a smaller office, says Dr. Ronald Leifer, a former student and Szasz supporter from Ithaca. Szasz hired a lawyer, Leifer says, and the state eventually backed off.

Instead, Leifer says, officials purged him and a handful of other colleagues who had supported Szasz. It's a claim Hollender disputes.

As the acrimony escalated, Hollender eventually resigned. Today, he says the faculty members who eventually left the department weren't going to advance and knew it. But rather than acknowledge that, he says they're trying to make it appear they were casualties of the controversy.

The one thing some observers agree on is that it took several years for the department to recover from the brouhaha over the book.

Szasz was a drawing card for some psychiatrists looking to come here, they say, and the deciding factor for some others who stayed away. Like it or not, Syracuse was known as a controversial place because he was here.

Supporters say it's not surprising personal freedom is an issue that is dear to Szasz's heart.

"He fled Nazi Europe. Because of what he saw, he does not trust the government to do the right thing, " Leifer says.

Brought up on books

Thomas Stephen Szasz was the second of two sons born into a wealthy family of intellectuals in Budapest in 1920. Under what was essentially still a feudal system, his parents rented out agricultural land in the surrounding countryside.

Szasz and his brother, George, grew up surrounded by books and intellectual pursuits. Back then, George's idea of fun was to bet his little brother he could memorize the mathematical symbol Pi to 30 digits in 15 minutes, Szasz told the New York Times Magazine several years ago.

As a boy, Szasz read everything by Mark Twain that he could get his hands on, devouring "Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn" in Hungarian. As he got older, he gravitated to the works of Thomas Jefferson.

But even before he read Jefferson, he was keenly aware of class differences. When he was about 9 or 10, he says, he begged his father not to dismiss his governess when he grew too old for a baby sitter. He worried how the woman would earn a living, and he wanted a promise she would never be discharged. The governess stayed on and cared for Szasz's ailing grandfather.

A Jew by birth, Szasz says he grew up in a family of "devout atheists." But in Europe in the mid-to-late '30s, it didn't matter if you went to synagogue or not.

Szasz's father didn't believe friends when they said Hitler was a troublemaker who'd soon burn himself out. So, four years before the Nazi invasion, he uprooted his family, resettling in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1938, when Szasz was 18.

A year after he resettled, Szasz entered the University of Cincinnati, where a paternal uncle was a professor of mathematics.

In two years he had received a degree in physics with honors. He went on to receive his medical degree, graduating first in his class. He took up internal medicine, but grew enamored of psychiatry instead.

'Two kinds of hospitals'

But at least on one level he chose his field precisely because he wanted to give voice to a realization he had come to years earlier.

"I had this thought when I was 5 years old, " Szasz says of his myth theory. "Everybody has it. I mean, as soon as people think about the world, they must realize there are two kinds of hospitals: one that you can get out of and one you can't."

He studied psychiatry at the University of Chicago in a residency program that appealed to him because there was no psychiatric ward in the hospital and no committed mental patients. There was only a clinic.

For 18 months, Szasz studied psychoanalytic theory and steered clear of mental hospitals. But then the laid-back chairman of his department quit.

He was replaced by a younger man who told Szasz he wanted him to spend his third year of training at a state hospital for the mentally ill.

"I said, 'I won't go because I don't believe in it,'" Szasz recalls. "It was obvious he had no idea what I was talking about. He kept pushing. And finally I said, 'I'll tell you what. I quit.'"

Szasz came to Syracuse in 1956, recruited from Chicago by Hollender, the friend and former department head he later clashed with.

He had dallied with his theory in scholarly articles before, but he really didn't give voice to it until he came here and published "The Myth of Mental Illness."

A taste for controversy

Far from chastening him, the experience with that book may have egged him on, his friend Orgel says. He continued to write - and write prolifically.

By his estimation, Szasz has authored 22 books and more than 500 professional articles.

He has tackled everything from the insanity defense (patently ridiculous, he says) to state restrictions on illicit drugs (preposterous) to government-funded abortions (absurd) to the death penalty (a sound idea in some cases.)

His latest book, coming out in the spring, is "Our Right to Drugs: The Case for a Free Market."

"I believe the United States government does not have the right to prohibit (illegal drugs), just like it does not have the right to lock up somebody whose grandfather happens to be Japanese," he says.

He believes government should stop meddling in our lives, period. Calling him "right wing" is putting it mildly, he says. "I'm as far right as you can go."

Although Szasz did not court them, groups like the John Birch Society and the Church of Scientology adopted him at one time or another, quoting him in their publications. He did little to disassociate himself from either of them, a fact that irritated even some of his closest friends.

Although he helped form a group that worked for the abolition of involuntary mental hospitalization, Szasz never got involved in advocacy groups for the mentally ill, a fact that isn't lost on his detractors, either.

"I'm a solitary person, " he says. "I don't work with anyone."

But he didn't shy away from notoriety. Outside Syracuse, he often testified for prosecutors trying to beat insanity defenses. He appeared on the former Dick Cavett Show. He lectured. He even consented to being interviewed by former "shock talk" TV host Morton Downey Jr.

Hits the lecture circuit

Szasz continues to lecture around the country. He is sometimes accompanied by his daughter Suzy, who is probably his greatest confidant.

She and her older sister, Margot, a physician who lives out of state, chose to stay with their father after he and their mother, the late Rosine Szasz, were divorced in 1970.

Suzy, a librarian at Cornell University, remembers how her father was the first to suspect she had a disease called lupus when she was stricken by a number of mysterious symptoms at the age of 13.

"Not only did they not take the diagnosis seriously, they didn't take him seriously, " Suzy Szasz says of her doctors at the time. "But he persisted with it."

After the physicians finally confirmed his diagnosis, Szasz encouraged Suzy to stay independent. He gave his daughter books that preached personal responsibility.

"He lived his theories, " Suzy Szasz says of her father's focus on independence. "To me that was proof that what he wrote about was what he really believed."

Today, he is just as consumed when he puts pen to paper. She has stumbled on him writing away at 3 a.m. and other bleak times in the night.

"I work hard, but I'm capable of 'vegging, '" Suzy Szasz says. "He's always doing something."

And, of course, he's still always asking "why."

"His mom once said to me, 'As a boy, you always had to reason with Tom, ' " psychologist Orgel remembers.

"She said, 'It wasn't simply, Tom: Do this. He always had to know why, even as a little tyke. He always had to know why.' "

Thomas Stephen Szasz

Born: April 15, 1920, in Budapest, Hungary. Emigrated to the United States with his family in 1938.

Work: Joined SUNY Health Sciences Center, formerly Upstate Medical Center, in 1956.

Personal: Married Rosine Loshkajian in 1951. The couple was divorced in 1970. She is now deceased. He has two daughters, Margot and Suzy.

Most Famous Book: "The Myth of Mental Illness, " 1961.

The quotable Szasz

Some views from Dr. Thomas Szasz:

On psychiatry: "Formerly, priests burned men's bodies to save their souls. Today, psychiatrists imprison men's bodies to save their minds."

On suicide: "He who does not accept and respect the choice to reject life does not truly accept and respect life itself."

On mental illness: "In my view, (Sigmund) Freud did something very interesting, but also something catastrophic... He managed to define ordinary human problems as diseases called neurosis."

On his stature: "I have become very influential in everything except psychiatry. In psychiatry, I'm a heretic."

On the Jeffrey Dahmer trial: "Do we want to live in a country where someone who admits to killing 15 people can plead guilty and insane, and put him in a building called a hospital? Hospitals are for innocent people. The whole idea of sending him to a mental hospital is obscene."

On religion: "Social cohesion seems to require that people unite around a fiction. You can't unite around a fact - facts are not interesting. All societies are organized around lies. They usually are called religion."

On motivation: "Men are rewarded or punished not for what they do, but for how their acts are defined. That is why men are more interested in better justifying themselves than in better behaving themselves."

On marriage: "Marriages are said to be made in heaven, which may be why they don't work here on Earth."

